Charmed & Dangerous: The Story of How It Came To Be
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Charmed & Dangerous: The Story of How It Came To Be

by stoneofdreams

Summary

The inconceivable way the *'Charmed and Dangerous'* books came to be. Harper Centric. (Inspired by 2x16 Future Harper)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the wizard competition, life had taken on a new normal…or as Harper quickly learned, as normal as the Russo's could be.

Max was spending more time with Jerry, learning all the ways of the sub shop while also suggesting his own ideas. Jerry was quickly realizing his son was a natural, and Harper was happy to witness that. Whenever she visited she'd often see the man smiling, no longer stressed, but happy that the family business would continue and become even better in the next generation. Theresa was even more relaxed, a happy wife and mother. Harper didn't see Justin as often now, always hearing from the family that he was at Wiztech doing whatever a headmaster did.

Her and Alex finally got that apartment they'd always wanted. And this time it wasn't on a secret wizard floor or run by a dark angel.

They had both gotten into NYU (it was honestly a miracle...that no one wanted to look into). Harper chose fashion and Alex picked art. It was a relief to all older Russo family members. Alex was finding herself a future and not abusing her full wizard powers. At least not to their knowledge (rent wasn't cheap and the air conditioning was broken when they got it, so...)

Finally finished with classes, she sent a text to Alex that she'd most likely get home by five. She had a late lunch date with Zeke and then planned to buy a bunch of fabrics at her favourite store. Alex texted back right away; a short 'OK!'

But then Zeke had to cancel plans after a tough class, asking Harper if she was okay with him staying behind. Of course she said it was fine. She knew how anxious Zeke got during the school year. He always worked so hard, one of the qualities she found particularly cute. So, they simply rescheduled their date for the day after.

She went to the fabric store, earlier than expected, and got lost in the pretty textures and designs for a good two hours. Realizing how late it was getting, she then headed back to the apartment.

The apartment was smaller than their previous one, and a little overpriced, but luckily there were perks to being best friends with a wizard. She really couldn't complain. It gave them the independence they'd been wanting for awhile now, and it was a little closer to NYU. Plus, she was quickly growing to love it, already feeling the coziness.

Lugging the piles of fabric up the stairs, she could already hear the heavy bass of the stereo from Alex's set up studio. Typical Alex. She'd have to lecture her, again, before the landlord could use this to kick them out.

She managed to unlock the door without dropping any fabric. Then, as she twisted the doorknob open, she saw one of the most unexpected sights.

Looking back, maybe it wasn't so unexpected, but just shocking. After all, this rejected all morals she was raised on.

Her best friend lay on their cramped couch, sucking face with a boy. Only problem was Harper knew this boy practically her whole life, and had harboured the most obsessive silly crush on him.

They were practically intertwined with each other. Her hands wrapped around his neck, combing through his hair. His hands, respectively, placed perfectly at her hips, as he pressed her into the couch. The bass thumped loudly in her ears as she watched. It was both horrific yet fascinating, like a car crash she couldn't look away from.

Harper had never seen either of them like this. Their ex lovers were always so conservative. Light kisses on the cheek from Mason, or proper hugs from Juliet. However, this wasn't conservative at all for a number of reasons. It was heat and passion and fire. Like they couldn't get enough of each other. It was appalling and groundbreaking. Which terrified Harper.

"Oh my god!" She shrieked, in perfect Harper pitch. Dropping her beautiful fabrics all over the floor.

Several things happened all at once. Justin accidentally bit down on Alex's bottom lip which caused her to jerk forward, butting heads with him. He, in turn, toppled over onto the floor bringing Alex with him, hands still gripping her waist. The bass screeched to a halt, no doubt Alex's magic naturally stopping the music.

Alex held her head, taking five seconds to recover, before bolting up right. "Harper this isn't what it looks like," she said, wincing when she placed a finger to her bruised lip. The lips that had been kissing Justin's.

"Really?" Harper's eyes widened as she looked Alex right in the eye. Then flicked her eyes

towards Justin, hoping to get some kind of response out of him. Instead, he looked at her like a startled deer-caught-in-the-headlights. Mouth agape, eyes frantic, hair mussed, frozen on the floor. At any other time, she would have laughed, finding Justin's reactions highly amusing, but this just filled her stomach with dread. This just confirmed he was doing something he wasn't supposed to and she hadn't actually just imagined that whole scene.

"Because it looks like you were making out with your brother," she finished. Still not sure how to process the situation.

What are you supposed to do when you find your best friend making out with her *brother*?

"It's a new form of CPR training Justin was teaching me because he's a dork and likes things like first aid." Alex managed through the whole lie. Alex was good at being swift, but she was weak at making the lies believable, especially when she was trying to lie to her best friend. Justin's eyebrows didn't even furrow into judgement as they usually did when he witnessed Alex's elaborate lies. Instead he stared at Harper wide eyed, still on the floor.

Which meant he was conspiring with Alex. Which meant this was real. This was real. Oh my God! Harper felt nauseous at that, how could anyone develop feelings for their sibling. It didn't work like that. Wasn't there a psychological block or a biological stopper? She was gonna throw up, right all over her fabrics.

"Harper," Justin called. She turned her head up, he was finally off the floor and coming closer. "Are you okay?" He approached her slowly as if any sudden movement would scare her, and if she was honest, it would have.

"I have to go," Harper said. She looked at her fabric still on the floor, then turned to bolt-.

"Wait!" Alex shouted. "Harper I'll leave. You can stay here. You have nowhere else to go."

Harper thought for a moment. It was true. Her parents were somewhere in Romania and she didn't want to see Jerry, Theresa or Max after what she witnessed. And her and Zeke were taking things really slow for her to just show up. Plus, Zeke was Justin's best friend and- OH GOD, why was everyone so connected in her life?

Yeah, she'd much rather stay here and self isolate. But then...

“Where will you go?” She asked. If Alex went home she’d have to come up with an excuse, and then Theresa would call Harper and she’d have to talk to someone and she really didn’t think it was a good idea for her to talk to anyone at the moment.

“I’ll figure it out,” Alex said, and then glanced at Justin. And, oh god, that was way too obvious.

“Okay,” Harper said, just to fill the space, then she stepped aside in a way to convey it was time to go.

Justin headed to the door first, and Harper actively avoided his gaze. Alex followed behind, but paused right in front of Harper.

“Harper, don’t tell anyone, okay?” Alex said. Harper remained silent, staring at anything but her best friend. Ex best friend?

And then a hand gripped her wrist. Harper stared into fearful eyes, so unlike the Alex she knew. “Harper…” Alex pleaded, then she added “Please…”

Alex never begged for things in her life. She manipulated people, she deceived, she persuaded. Not once in her life had she ever begged.

“I won’t,” Harper said. And it was true. This was Alex and Justin’s mess to fix. She would wash her hands of it.

The hand on her was removed and she saw Alex and Justin visibly relax. And then Justin headed out the door with Alex. And before she closed the door, she saw him take her hand and interlace their fingers together, squeezing tightly.

Harper slammed it shut. Turned around and slid down the door frame, laying her head on her knees. She pressed her hands to her face in an attempt to remove the image of them in her mind.

What was her life, really?

She stared down at the piles of fabric she’d just bought today. Realized how normal the day

started, maybe if Zeke and her went to lunch then she wouldn't have seen what just happened. Maybe if she had stayed entranced with those textures, patterns and colours a lot longer, she could have stayed in this perfect delusion.

And then, she thought about those lunch plans she rescheduled with Zeke for tomorrow. She'd have to reschedule again. Actually, she'd much rather just not go out for lunch in general. She'd rather hole up in this apartment for maybe a month. Maybe until next year. Maybe more than that. Or maybe she just needed to talk to a really good therapist.

She spent a good three days in her room moping around. The first night, right after they left, she texted Zeke that she was dealing with some mental health problems. He called her immediately, very worried and a little restless, but she was able to calm him down. Without even noticing, he had managed to distract her for a bit. The sweet boy.

She checked her phone for any texts from Alex, but there were none.

Then, she emailed her professors saying it was a family emergency and texted her friends from school for any notes she would miss. Nearly texted Alex, but was able to stop herself.

Throughout the three days, she did absolutely nothing. Barely ate, barely slept, and didn't look at her school work at all. Just sat still, looking around the apartment she once shared, her phone clutched in her hand. She felt unmotivated, uninspired, and just addled. Where was she supposed to go from here?

Her chest felt heavy, like she couldn't breathe at all. She felt so alone, and worst of all, she couldn't tell anyone what she saw. Couldn't even ask for advice on what to do.

She kept her phone close, waiting for a ring or a text from Alex. Her thumb even grazed the button several times (she hated to admit). Just one call and maybe everything would be better.

But no, nothing was the same.

On the third night, tired of how lifeless and dreadful she felt, she gave herself an insane pep talk. Because Harper Finkle didn’t let anyone or anything get her down. She raised herself in childhood, survived the circus, and found her own family. She wore goldfish headbands and tangerine dresses and had the world's most uncomfortable stare. And if she was motivated enough she could do anything.

She got up and took a shower, jammed to her favourite music on full blast, (screw the neighbours), hoping it would change her state of mind. It worked pretty well, until Mr. Romero banged on her door and threatened to complain to the landlord.

She made dinner for herself, a delicious cup of noodles. Alex forgot to buy groceries the other day. That kind of soured her mood, but she bounced back, facetiming Zeke and having a makeshift dinner date. He was sweet as always, and she let him talk on and on about science and robots. Enjoying how excitable and passionate he became when he geeked out.

So she was ready, well she was making herself ready to go back to society. There was just one more thing to do.

She picked a colour scheme: white, blue, and grey. Sketched her design, and then measured out the fabrics. Cut them and sewed them together. Naturally flowing through the movement like a dance she’d done her whole life. There was something so calming about the process of designing and making clothes. It was satisfaction like no other.

Making clothes was something she picked up in her pre-teen years. At first, she absolutely hated it: forced by her parents to create costumes for their shows. But then one day she realized that she could create clothes for herself. A piece never found in a clothing store, completely one of a kind, and absolutely her own. And she’ll be the first to admit she went a little crazy with the power, but she loved it. It was her way of expressing herself, of letting out her energy, and making something out of it.

This was her favourite creation yet, a robot dress completely inspired by Zeke. Content, she went to sleep, not realizing she hadn’t checked her phone once that day.

For the next few weeks, she put up a front. Exuding happiness with Zeke and was consistently upbeat in front of her friends. She was always early to classes and created the most pretty notes, and submerged herself in all her projects. She kept the secret buried in her mind, not knowing at all what she was to do with it.

It was now three weeks later.

“Hey, wait up, Harper!” A voice shouted to her. Harper immediately stiffened. Alex…

“Wow, I’ve been looking for you,” Alex smiled, she held her satchel in place as she finally caught up to where Harper stood.

“Hey…” Harper forced out. An awkward silence befell the two girls, not knowing at all what to say. It would have been a strange scene to those who were close to them.

“Well see you in P.E.!” Harper blurted, before she whipped around ready to bolt.

“Wait!” If Harper turned around she’d have seen the troubled look in Alex’s eyes, an outstretched hand reaching for her best friend.

“I can walk you to class, Fashion History, right?” Alex stumbled out. Harper was ready to say no until Alex interrupted her. “It’s no big deal. My class is right next door,” Alex finished. A slight nod, and Alex appeared by her side. “Ummm… so I heard of this really cool club that opened up downtown. It sounds sick, maybe we could go this weekend.”

“I’m actually pretty busy this weekend,” Harper replied quickly. She knew she didn’t want to hang out with Alex any time soon because whenever she looked at her she saw her on that couch with him.

“Oh okay. Well…” Alex began again. “Mom actually told me the crazy ten minute sale is happening next week on Thursday. And I’ve figured out all the secrets in getting the cutest clothing.”

“I don’t think I can go. I have a group project thing that day,” Harper managed to say. She was thrown off with how much the girl was putting effort into planning a hangout. Couldn’t Alex take the hint?

“Okay. Umm… ” Alex started again. She was really making an effort here. “Are you busy after class? I was hoping maybe I could come over. You know move back in again… I’ve run out of clothes-.“

Actually tired of Alex’s constant badgering, Harper turned ready to stop the girl when she took a look at her outfit.

“What are you wearing Alex?!” Harper exclaimed. It didn’t deserve the biggest reaction, but after what Harper saw a thousand explanations flew through her mind, all equally horrifying.

“I know right these jeans are so last season-.“

“You’re top-.”

“What…?” Alex peered down at herself and then her eyes flashed in recognition. “Oh, I didn’t do my laundry- who am I kidding I don’t do my own laundry-.” She let out a laugh at that. “I just stole it from Justin. And I think I did pretty good at making it cute.” She said, oh so casually, even posing a bit in her outfit.

Harper continued to stare at Alex, a judgemental expression clear on her face. Alex quickly deflated, “Oh come on Harper. I didn’t have anything to wear. It's not a big deal.”

“Yes it is!” She punctuated every word. She didn’t know why she was freaking out. But she was, because of this one misplaced item. “You’d never wear Justin’s clothes.”

“Yeah…” Alex seemed confused. Harper’s eyes narrowed at her best friend, her face flushing with heat. Did Alex really not get it? She understood that Alex wasn’t one to follow the status quo, like how she got detention or played around with her powers. But this was serious, like go to jail for a long time serious. Harper clenched her fists, how could she treat it like it was no big deal?

Taking a deep breath, Harper continued, “You call his clothes disgusting.” She could have dealt with Alex through this whole walk. Maybe she would have even gone to lunch with her, if Alex had badgered her enough. But that piece of fabric; it was like a sign. It was too closely linked to that day. That horrid day that should have never happened. She stared down Alex for what felt like an eternity but was only a few seconds.

“Why are you acting like this? Like that day never happened,” Harper said. It was as if Alex was trying to get past it, when it was the most mind-bending situation Harper had ever gotten herself into.

“Harper, what are you talking about?” Alex questioned, eyebrows furrowed.

“You kissed your own brother, Alex. That’s not normal,” Harper spat in disgust. If Alex wasn’t gonna address the situation at hand then she would.

“I know it isn’t.” Alex glanced away. There was shame laced in her voice.

“Why would you do that?” She asked. Harper needed answers because she was going crazy trying to figure them out.

“You wouldn’t understand,” Alex responded. Harper could physically see Alex curling into herself.

“You’re right,” and before she could stop herself, “No one would.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.” Alex’s voice trembled.

“What was it supposed to be like?”

Alex looked around before she began dragging Harper behind her.

“What are you doing?!” Harper exclaimed. Alex ignored her questions as she continued to drag her, finally ending at a private alleyway.

“I could use magic, make you forget that day ever happened,” Alex began. There was a fire behind her eyes as there always was when she began to scheme.

“You promised you’d never use magic on me.”

“But this is different. I’m asking you for permission. With your consent. And then we could go back to normal. I could move in again. And I promise I’ll be extra careful and cautious and you’ll never find out again-.”

“So you’ll still be with him?” Harper asked.

“Umm…” That made Alex pause. “Yes…” She looked away, guilty.

“Unbelievable,” Harper sighed, shaking her head in disbelief. She didn’t like this plan. Sure, ignorance was bliss. But she didn’t want to go back to not knowing after another earth shattering Russo secret. Like some puppet who wouldn’t know what happened behind closed doors complicit in their wrong doing. She was tired of the secrets. So she’d let Alex go and live with it.

“I need to get back to class.” She was done with this conversation.

“Wait, Harper please. I can make this right,” Alex pleaded. Reaching to grab onto Harper again.

Harper moved back.

“Alex, just go back to Justin.” And there was a tone of finality in Harper’s voice, so visible even Alex couldn’t ignore it.

They stared into each other's eyes.

Alex broke first, rushing to wipe a tear from her eye. She glared at Harper then, hatred in her eyes.

“Maybe if you hadn’t creeped on my brother for all of our teen years, you’d have seen it,” Alex snarled, venom dripping from her words. “Are you jealous? I think we all know why you settled for Zeke.” She then abruptly turned, walking away.

Harper watched her leave, her chest heaving, and her breath coming in rapid succession. Harper tried steadying herself. She knew what Alex said wasn’t true, but it still stung. Alex knew how to

get you where it hurt, when she herself was hurt. It was one of her ugliest talents, but it was also a tell that her own feelings were offended.

Gathering herself, she prepared for class. It was going to be a long day.

Through the rest of the day, an unsettled feeling slowly built in her stomach. The dread had come back.

For the next few weeks it stayed like that. Sometimes she'd catch sight of Alex on campus grounds, walking or sitting under a tree and drawing. Another piece of Justin coded clothing on her body every time.

Alex would glare at her before going back to drawing. For her part, she would just sighed every time before she turned and walked away.

She texted Theresa that she'd be grabbing some of her mannequins and fabrics she'd stored in their basement. Exams were fast approaching and she had multiple projects to work on.

Theresa told her they were out of town at a convention, and that included Max despite his protests. She should've wondered how she'd get inside.

She was just approaching the substation, glancing through the doors, when she saw them.

They were sitting at a booth. Cuddled together.

One half eaten club sandwich placed in front of the two of them. A coke and a water, a side of pickles. Their hands intertwined as they whispered quietly together.

Harper was a little shocked. If anyone peered through the windows, they'd see them. And everyone in the community knew who the Russos were.

Justin traced the lines of Alex's hands, a grin on his face. Alex giggled looking up at him with complete adoration in her eyes.

Harper had to look away, the scene was too much for her. She looked around, seeing people aimlessly strolling by.

A passerby would plainly see them as a couple.

But Harper knew, and knowing was the worst. Now the sweet familial relationship between Justin and Alex she'd always admired was horribly tainted. When did it cross over? How did they transition from sibling love to romantic. Yup, she needed to stop before she barfed.

Glancing up, she caught eyes with Alex through the window. Alex's eyes widened in surprise as she moved slightly, no doubt about to come to her. Before she could think about it, Harper turned on her heels, bolting back to her apartment. She could make do with the fabrics she had for now.

"Hey Harper, I saw you today. I was hoping you'd visit. Mom said you were dropping by so I wanted to catch you. Umm… Please call me back when you get the chance…We really need to talk."

So turns out she actually desperately needed that mannequin and the fabric.

The night air chilled her skin as she walked down Waverly for round two. It was already past closing time so she wouldn't have to worry about accidentally smacking customers with a mannequin body while she cleared out.

"Ay, Harper. How you been?!" Max's voice bellowed out through the Subshop as she entered. He was in the back kitchen looking through the open frame, arms outstretched, holding a ladle in one gloved hand. "I haven't seen you around the Subshop in so long."

"Yup, just need my fabrics," Harper replied, approaching the counter.

“Yeah, go on down and then when you come back up I need you to try something for me.” He enthused, energy radiating off his body.

“Sure…” Harper gave an uncommitted nod. Yeah, like she’d actually put anything he made into her mouth.

Downstairs, she grabbed her fabrics stuffing them into her bag and the one mannequin body. Oh how she missed them. They would do perfectly for her new idea.

“Oh good, you’re finished.” Max greeted her as soon as she reached the top of the stairs. He helped her with some fabrics but instead of hauling them out the Subshop, he placed them down on a clean table. “Time to try my new sandwich.”

“Max, why should I eat anything you make?” Harper raised her brow. She was kind of pissed Max was ruining her plans to clear out as quickly as she could. Plus, she was still traumatized by the last time she trusted anything he made. Big mistake.

Just this summer, he tried making beef jerky. Jerry was trying to save energy by making use of the heatwave that New York was experiencing. Just like his father, Max decided to leave the beef on the bare rooftop to ”cook.” Yeah, her taste buds and her stomach were still trying to recover.

“Oh, come on Harper,” Max pouted, a hint of that childish boy popping out.

She had missed Max a lot these past few months. He’s always been like a little brother to her, one she always wished the best for. But she was a Russo and Russos didn’t usually admit their feelings, unless they were Alex. She didn’t want to think about how Alex dealt with her feelings.

“I’m the family business owner, I’ll be making food for all of New York-.“

“Which worries me greatly,” she interjected. Harper could already feel the familiarity setting in. The bantering and quick quips she learned from them were good ways to avoid the huge elephant stomping around in her brain.

“And I need you to be my guinea pig. Come on. Please Harper, you owe me some of your time. You haven’t visited in so long.” Max pulled out a stool at the counter. Sighing heavily, Harper finally gave in. Only for a bit.

She sat at the counter as Max ran into the kitchen to grab his sandwich.

“It’s the newest version of ”To The Max,” just double better now.” Max nodded and with the utmost care he placed a sandwich overflowing with various ingredients in front of Harper.

Harper stared down at the sandwich before looking back up at Max’s excited face. Did he really expect her to eat this?

“Come on,” Max cheered. Harper heaved a deep sigh, already surrendering. She was totally going to regret this. She grabbed the sandwich and struggled to take the first bite out of it.

She chewed for a little, it was edible, that was a good sign. Then, her head naturally nodded as she recognized the taste. And then- suddenly her taste buds opened to the perfectly cooked, tender, seasoned meat and the crisp, toasted bread and the fresh, crunchy lettuce. And the distinct flavours combined to create a perfect harmony in her mouth, and *holy gravy*!

“Max, this is amazing!” She exclaimed out of surprise, eyes wide and stunned. It’s like her taste buds were opened to a new world. It’s not that the sandwich was extraordinary, or fit for a fancy restaurant, but it was a really good sandwich, perfectly crafted with quality ingredients and loaded with flavor.

“I know! I’m gonna launch it next week. Dad said it’s better than anything he’s ever made. Says he’s really proud of it; of me,” Max said, words coming out in rapid succession. Harper grabbed onto that last word, happy and very emotional that Max had that parental pride he’d wanted since childhood.

She couldn’t help but give him a hug then, so proud, so happy for him. Then she finished her sandwich while talking to him about whatever seemed to pop into his mind. She’d missed the warmth she always felt from the Russo family.

“You want dessert?”

“Hmmm…” Just because she had one of the best sandwiches she ever tasted, did not mean she would give full trust into Max’s food creation. But what the heck? “Fine.”

Max ran off once again returning with a bowl of-.

“Are those sugar cubes drenched in honey?” Harper asked.

“It’s called ‘Boy Salad,’” he chimed in. There’s the Max she knows and loves.

It tasted just as she expected: honey and sugar and sweet, sweet, sweet. Perfect for an eight year-old who didn’t know any better. “For your sake, never sell this unless you want health conscious parents tearing this business to the ground.”

“Just a childhood favorite of mine I wanted to share,” he smiled. Harper chuckled at that, sometimes she had no idea how Jerry and Theresa managed to raise this boy.

“By the way, Alex has been asking about you,” Max began. She froze at that. She should’ve expected this. She’s Alex’s best friend, of course they’d ask.

“Yeah, she probably wants me to make her a new top or some-,“ She sputtered out.

“Harper, I know. I know she hasn’t been living with you since the beginning of the school year. That she’s living with Justin now.”

Not Max. Oh gosh, not Max. Not sweet, innocent, too good for this world Max. Does he know?

“I know about them, Harper.”

How did he find out? Is he okay with *it*? Will he tell someone about Justin and Alex?

“It’s okay, Harper. I’ve known for a long time now. I think I’ve figured it out before they did,” Max chuckled, a smile on his face.

He wasn’t disgusted. There was no forced acceptance. He seemed happy for them instead.

“What do you mean you’ve known before they did?” Harper asked, extremely confused. What had she missed? Were there signs? How did Max see it before she did?

She needed to know.

“Remember that summer Alex and Mom were fighting like crazy? And then Alex went to the Caribbean with us instead of staying with you?” Harper nodded. “Something happened then and I don’t know what. I don’t remember, but I can feel that it was huge. Justin and Alex were really close after the events of that summer.”

Recalling that summer, she remembered how Alex seemed slightly off. Sometimes she’d catch this frantic searching look in her eyes. They didn’t hang out much that summer, and when they did, Justin seemed to always tag along. She never realized how much time Justin spent with them, seeing it as a blessing that she could hang out with her best friend's hot older brother.

“And then their relationship was intense. It was like when they were together, they were inseparable, and when they were apart they hated each other’s guts,” he explained.

“When we were children we’d play family and Alex was always the dad and Justin the mom and I was the baby. And Alex loved throwing weddings and dressing up and getting married to Justin.” He shook his head laughing a little at the memory. “And then there was that time when I had that girlfriend and Justin and Alex pretended to be my parents. I was shocked when I saw them aged and fat but Alex was smiling and having a blast again. And it was like taking me back to my childhood.”

Harper remembered Justin’s big gut and Alex’s bingo wings. She wasn’t even phased by them acting like an old married couple because they always schemed together. Who better to solve problems or fail miserably together then Justin and Alex. And it was crazy to realize Max had known this whole time.

“That was when it made sense that those two weren't what the world deemed ‘normal,’” he finished. “But, it’s just always been like that. That’s all I’ve ever seen them as.”

She replayed the situations of Justin and Alex. How they always seemed to be standing side by side, no matter if they were teaming up or fighting. How they always made sure they were involved in each other’s lives, a constant prominent presence. How they seemed to always have this separate space for just the two of them.

Harper nodded, she needed to ponder her thoughts.

“Come on, I’ll walk you home.” Max stood up, grabbing her fabrics.

It was a silent walk, Harper lost in her thoughts as Max enjoyed the night air.

“Harper talk to them okay?” Max requested, when they’d reached her apartment complex. She nodded. She would one day. She felt she was getting closer to understanding, but she still needed time to process.

“When did you get so smart, Max?” She asked instead.

“I didn’t.” He deadpanned, shaking his head. “I just care about them. They're my older brother and sister. They’ve always taken care of me so I need to take care of them.”

“Hey Harper, it’s Alex. I heard Max managed to convince you to try his new sandwich. I know that was complete blind trust. And It’s fantastic, right?! I’m so fucking proud of Maxie. Will you be going to the Subshop next week for the launch…?Umm..Call me back.”

Harper didn’t go. And she had yet to respond to Alex’s various voicemails. She knew she should talk to them. Things were beginning to make sense, but she couldn’t accept them yet. She didn’t think she could take it seeing them as a couple. It was ingrained in her to feel repulsion and disgust. And unlearning and understanding and accepting would take time.

In the meantime: she would focus on school, and friends and Zeke. Sweet Zeke.

“God, please- answer the phone Harper. I never wanted to see you look at me like that. I’m sick- I’m so fucking sick. And I know it. I hate myself. I hate what I am.… But please Harper, you have

to understand. Please. I-I just- I can't live without him."

Harper had nearly broken down by the end of the voicemail. She'd never heard such pain, and self -hatred. The worst of it was Alex's crying. How she hiccuped and barely managed through her sentences. She heard someone else at the other end of the phone, comforting Alex and calming her down. She instinctively knew it was him; it was Justin.

She remembered when she was a child, her therapist told her to write down what was bothering her. Write out her emotions, and then read them, break them down and come to an understanding.

She used the method often and soon she began writing stories. Trying to control her situation and give herself the endings she wanted.

When she was younger. Her name was Hayley in the books she wrote. A gorgeous redheaded goddess warrior, who had access to all the fabrics of the world. She was charming, stringing men along everywhere she went, and utterly dangerous. It was where she drew her happiness from until she found her passion in fashion.

Then she met Alex. She forgot the books and the writing because she had something better then Hayley. And she was swept up in Alex's charm and danger.

But now she'd have to go back to using the same method. So she began to write once again. But this time she didn't change the story, instead she explored the depth of the character's emotions.

Her name was Julia, a fun loving brunette who had a mischievous streak. A wizard in training. Julia had an older brother named Alan. He was good in everything she was not and always praised by their parents. She felt encompassed by his shadow and was constantly trying to break free of it.

One day she'd had enough of being compared to her brother, and wished on a genie for everyone to stop comparing them. And things ended up not turning out as she thought they would. Instead, no one remembered him. Alan was mad but Julia kept her cool. Until he turned invisible and she panicked. She was scared. She was terrified that her brother would be invisible for the rest of their lives, and she was quickly realizing she preferred having him around rather than gone.

Alex told her about the story after that one apartment party when they lived on the wizard floor. After Justin left, followed by Mason, Alex popped out a bottle of Smirnoff. (They were underage, but Alex managed to convince someone to buy it for her). They drank the night away having very deep, well actually more like drunk off their asses, conversations.

"Justin...said I-I make... his life com-complete. Wh-what a dork," Alex giggled, a bright smile on her face.

They sat on the cold wooden floor, passing back and forth the bottle to pour into their shot glasses. Harper wasn't a lightweight but it seemed Alex was.

"Yeah…" Harper nodded in agreement, after taking a shot. She felt woozy, sure, but Alex seemed to be really out of it.

"He-he makes my life complete too." Alex nodded to herself, holding her chest to convey the sincerness. "Hey Harper…Did I ever tell you about the time I turned him invisible?"

"Nope."

"Well, when I was fourteen I hated being compared to him…and this one day Mr. Larritate, Mom…and Dad compared us and I was so tired of it I wished on a genie for it to stop," Alex slurred out, a pout steady on her face.

"Wait a minute, I remember that. I thought Justin was the new boy and that you ignored my dibs. Oh gosh, I thought you were dating your own brother." Harper laughed, cringing at the idea.

"Yeah…" Alex nodded, "but then he turned invisible…" she whimpered. Her mood was changing drastically, verging on very emotional. "And I was scared because he's Justin, and I'm supposed to see him. And I couldn't see him and-."

"Oh sweetie. Okay that's enough of that." Harper rushed to her friend's side, struggling to pry the bottle out of her hands.

"And...shhhh...don't tell anyone Harper, but I was terrified. I can't live without Justin. I just can't."

“Yeah, uh huh.” She pulled Alex up then, guiding her to her bed.

“Thanks for listening, Harper. You’re the best.”

She wrote the story of Alan turning invisible with little Sam pouring orange soda in the genie's lamp. The time Julia managed to get herself stuck in a scary movie and Alan had to save her. The time Alan teached Julia how to ride a magic carpet. (A magic carpet, are they serious? How could she have missed how romantic that was? Like Aladdin and Jasmine singing a *Whole New World*.)

Whenever Harper thought of them she wrote down her emotions. She replayed everything in her mind, focused on the moment, and wrote it down. There were so many years to unfold and look at differently. And she was finally seeing the signs and finding the answers. And things began to click into place. She was getting tangible evidence of maybe, just maybe, why Justin and Alex worked.

She felt a sense of relief as she wrote about them. Something was familiar in the stories. Wrapped in warmth and nostalgia of both her childhood and teenage years. As if she’d read them before, but was just now seeing them through a different lens.

“I’m sorry, Harper. I’m so sorry. I tried so hard- I tried so hard not feeling what I felt for him.”

A knock on the door pulled her out of her thoughts. She went to go open the door and immediately attempted to slam it shut once she saw who was there.

“Harper, wait!” Justin yelped. He placed his hand on the door, preventing it from smacking into his face.

“What do you want?” She grumbled out. Big brother dearest was here to save the day like he always did. (Like with the taxi, and that time in Transylvania, and when he forfeited his powers in the competition for her because she turned back to help him win- yeah… she’d been writing a lot lately). Half of her found it sweet, the other felt vile even thinking that maybe those actions weren’t

done with the most innocent intentions.

“I haven’t seen you in a while and wanted to check up on you. Can we talk for old time sake?” Justin asked, pleading within his grey eyes.

“You want some tea?” Harper sighed, giving in. She opened the door wider, letting him in.

Justin nodded, an eager smile on his face. She seemed to have a soft spot for these Russos.

“So how have you been?” Justin asked, a little tea cup grasped in his hands as he stood in the little apartment.

So it was small talk. Good, she could do small talk.

“Just, you know, trying to get through second semester. I have a lot of group projects and assignments to finish. And I’m actually currently working on this one-of-a-kind piece.” She moved over to the mannequin in the center of the room with various fabrics pinned into it. “It’s a dress and I want the textures to grab at your eyes as it needs to be big and bold. The concept is a peach growing in the forest. I’m still designing it.”

“It looks really good, Harper. I’m no fashion expert but I know you are. And I know you’ll succeed in whatever you have in mind. You’ve always been good at fashion ever since high school.”

She hadn’t had such a chill conversation with Justin. Her younger self had always wanted to jump his bones, but it was like talking to a good friend. One who was willing to listen to you spiel about your passion.

“Umm…so how’s Wiztech?”

“As hard as I expected. But I’m confident I can do well. There’s a lot to read and learn and consume and I’ve always loved doing that.” He began, pausing to take a sip of his tea. “And now there’s a very bored Alex in my court, and she’s both my salvation and my damnation.” He chuckled out, a gleam in his eyes as he talked fondly of his sister. Of. His. *Sister.*

Harper froze right when Alex was mentioned. Small talk is very bad. It's horrible.

She didn't know why this was any different from Max talking about Justin and Alex. Well she knew exactly why, the person who she was currently talking to is in love with his sister.

"Harper, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to mention Alex. It's just you're the second person who knows and I forgot that doesn't mean you're okay with it," he supplied.

She was about to say it was fine, but it was far from fine. She felt like she was retreating again. Like all she'd done over these past few months to try to understand them was getting destroyed with one singular visit. He needed to leave right now.

"I really need to get back to this dress, Justin…"

She pulled the tea from his hands, bringing them to the sink, before subtly trying to push him out the door.

"Wait Harper," he squeaked. "Just one thing. Can I get some of Alex's things?…She's been stealing all of my clothes." He gave her his pleading eyes again.

"Fine."

"Thank you, Harper." Then he dashed off to Alex's room.

Harper closed her eyes, sighing loudly as she tried to gather herself. Okay, she could do this.

She walked to Alex's room only to see him standing with a photo of herself and Alex in his hands. Theresa had snapped the picture when they were nine years-old. They were making arts and crafts in the Russo living room. Justin was even in the back attempting to assemble a robot.

"I was jealous of you," he said, snapping her out of the memory and confusing her a whole lot.

Justin: intelligent, ambitious, goal oriented, charming, somewhat athletic, definitely fit, Student

Body President, Valedictorian, and now Headmaster of Wiztech was jealous…Jealous of her. And her face must have looked pretty comical, cause he ended up laughing at her.

"No, I'm serious Harper. I remember getting home from second grade one day and seeing you sitting right beside Alex. Heard the story of how you guys had to nap in different classes because you were both snorers. And I knew from that day on you guys were best friends. Alex started pulling away from me then. She didn't look up to me anymore. I was just her dorky older-." He stopped himself, taking in her reaction. "Sorry."

Harper wrinkled her nose. Yup, it was a good idea for him to cut off then. But his jealousy still did not make sense. But he was another Russo brother trying to help her make sense of the situation. She quietly laughed at that. Alex was lucky to have them. After all, Justin was always the one to solve problems. He was the voice of reason. So maybe hearing him out wouldn't be so bad.

"I know it's normal. Siblings grow apart, get their own best friends and usually shut the other out for most aspects of their life. But I think you can agree, Alex and I have never been normal." Harper had to confess, the Russo's had always been their own brand of dysfunctional.

"For one we're wizards, Harper. A secret we've had to keep and will continue to keep for the rest of our lives. We've depended on each other a lot in that isolation." Isolation alone was never fun, she could attest to that, but at least Justin and Alex had each other. Secrets did tend to bring people closer together.

"And then you showed up and she had a best friend who understood her more, that she felt she could talk to about anything. And I got pushed off to the side….And sometimes I felt like it was this weird competition you were unaware you were a part of. Like when Bert, the floating cab, crashed into the kitchen and Alex said I was the one who always looked out for her. It was a little victory against you in my mind, and I know it's so messed up."

It was a lot to take in. She didn't have anything to say. She had no idea he had felt like that. But it was good she was listening, to hear it from one of the people who had been on her mind so long.

"Look, it was just weird to realize that sometimes I wasn't number one in her life anymore…" He trailed off. Harper began to laugh, not at all believing what she was hearing.

"Trust me, Justin. She never shuts up about you. And that's not to say what she says is good," she joked. And then she realized something, a small thing, but so significant. "It's like you're always on her mind, always the focal point. And you influence her actions and decisions whether that's for you or in spite of you."

And then she looked at Justin and she saw a reflection of understanding in his eyes. “That’s the way it is for me too.” He softly smiled. “If I knew how to stop it, Harper, I would. But ever since I read this one book, I could never ignore it.” He began, there were conflicting emotions, she could see it in his eyes: distress and sorrow, but greater than that a certain reminiscing contentment. “So I read more books, read so many case studies, read historical books, learned the biology and the psychology hoping it would force me to stop the way I was feeling. I even secretly went to a therapist and it never went away. And it never will because I’m in love with her, Harper. I’m completely in love with her and I can’t stop it and I don’t want to.”

Well, okay, that was a lot.

The closest thing she had to love was Zeke. She didn’t know if she was in love with him, but she knew that she didn’t want to live without him. And if she couldn’t be with Zeke, it would suck, but at least she’d be able to separate herself from him. But, Justin would have to live his life, looking at her and loving her from afar. He’d already lived for years burying his feelings and denying them.

Her therapist had once told her it wasn’t healthy for the psyche to deny it’s emotions and that it’d lead to a very burdening life. People should not have to deny their emotions. Justin had suffered in silence. He’d fought it for so long, but nothing could stop him.

She could never imagine going through what Justin did. But, she’d always read books of characters falling in love with people they shouldn’t. This was the extreme version of forbidden love. A worse fate than Romeo and Juliet (and she cried at Romeo and Juliet) because where Romeo and Juliet were the host unto themselves, Alex and Justin were born into their tragedy.

Justin was in love with Alex and he wanted to be with her in a way society told him not to. But, society was always so quick to judge people. They’d discriminated against so many people for the colour of their skin, for their religion, for going against norms, stepping outside of the box, for loving who they wanted to love. She’d even let society influence her own judgement. How were Justin and Alex any different from two people who simply and consensually loved each other?

A tear slipped down Harper’s face as if she could empathize with his ongoing pain. Everything seemed to click into place, a strong revelation had occurred for her.

She looked over to see Justin, tears silently streaming down his face. If she teared up from this one conversation, she knew Justin had cried about this more than once in the past. She couldn’t stop herself from giving him a hug then.

“Thanks Harper. Thanks for listening.” Justin nodded, quickly wiping his face. It felt nice for her to finally give positivity out into the world after so long.

After composing themselves, he poofed in a bag and began stuffing Alex’s clothes in it. Harper noticed all Alex’s new clothes, the ones she was excited to wear ever since she bought them a few months ago. Then he grabbed some of Alex’s most favourite clothing pieces, like that red scarf she loved wearing all the time, her favourite suede knee high boots, and those jeans that hugged her legs and butt perfectly (according to Alex herself, of course). Next a dress, Harper herself had made. Lastly, he grabbed some of Alex’s favourite paintbrushes and some blank canvases.

Harper knew all these things were Alex’s favorite clothing pieces and it seemed Justin was the only other person who knew as well.

“Harper, you need to realize Alex may need you more than you need her,” Justin said.

“I never thought-,“ Harper began, a little flustered.

“You’re amazing, Harper. You’ve always been there for her. And you’re kind, considerate and patient. So patient with Alex. No one could be Alex’s best friend but you. So please just try to understand…”

Harper nodded at that. She felt like she was almost there, almost at that point.

Shaking her head a little, she lightened the mood. “You know Justin, after all these years, you can’t just try to romance me now,” she chuckled.

“Wait- I wasn’t trying to-.” And then he looked up to see her laughing. It was a peace offering. She was trying to go back to their usual patterns. Show him everything was fine and maybe that she was ready to reconcile. Harper was tired of this fighting. She missed her best friend.

“No, thank you, Harper. You’re like the sister I’ve never had,” he replied. She cringed, just a bit, still not used to the atypical relationship she’d gotten herself into with these Russos.

And then she saw Justin’s face and ended up bursting into laughter. Sure, they were weird. Sure, they weren’t the healthiest family. But who the hell was perfect? They were her family, and Harper was proud to call herself an honorary Russo; messed up and all.

“I swear, Harper. You’re my best friend. I swore it on dandelions, on the sun and the moon. You’ve done so much for me. I won’t be with him anymore. I won’t. I won’t…? Just please please please please pickup the phone.”

An eleven year-old Harper ran straight into the substation, holding two dandelions in her hand.

“Harper, what are you doing?” Alex asked. Surprised at her best friend's entrance, she struggled down the stool she was sitting in, her pigtails swinging about.

“Alex! Alex! I just read the most amazing book and we have to do what is called The Friendship Vow,” Harper exclaimed.

“Umm, okay….” Alex said, unsure of how to react to Harper’s excitement.

“Hold your pinky out and repeat after me:” Harper poised her stance holding out her own pinky, and lifting her chin. “I solemnly swear-.”

“-I salami swear-,” Alex mimicked with conviction, raising her chin as well, a bright smile on her face.

“-No, Alex. It’s sol. emn. ly swear.”

“I solemnly swear…”

“Good.” Harper nodded excitedly. “To be faithful to my bosom friend, Alex Russo…” She smiled at her best friend “…as long as the sun and moon shall endure. Now you say it and put my name in."

“I solemnly swear…” Alex looked to Harper once again for confirmation. At Harper’s nod, she continued.

“To be faithful to my bosom…” She giggled at that. Stopping when Harper loudly cleared her throat. Alex finished smiling.“...friend, Harper Finkle, as long as the sun and moon shall endure.”

Harper blew her dandelion and Alex followed suit. The girls shared a hug.

“Okay, now that that’s done... You wanna sneak into Justin’s room with me and steal his toys!?” Alex asked.

“No, that’s bad Alex.” Harper frowned.

“Justin’s asleep in his bed. You could keep watch on him while I grab some of his things,” Alex persuaded.

Harper didn’t enjoy going along with Alex’s schemes, but she couldn’t say no to an unconscious Justin. The two girls shared a look before a giggling Alex began dragging Harper up the spiral staircase.

“Harper. I got your voicemail and don’t worry; me and Justin are good. I’d love to meet for lunch soon.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have ghosted you for so long. I felt so horrible whenever I listened to your voicemails and I couldn’t find it in me to reply,” Harper apologized. It was the first thing she needed to do. She felt so guilty leaving Alex in the dark.

“No, Harper. I’m sorry. Especially about what I said. I shouldn’t have pressured you so much. I should have given you space and let you come to terms with it on your own,” Alex began. “I shouldn’t have swept it under the bridge and acted like it was no big deal. I should’ve just been truthful.”

“No Alex, I should be sorry-.“

“Harper,” Alex’s eyes shut tight as she chucked a bit, “do we both agree that we’re sorry and forgive each other?” she smiled.

“Yeah.” Harper grinned. They were in the subway cart seats in the Subshop for privacy sake, not wanting anyone to overhear this conversation. Both of them had a “To the Max 2.0” sandwich. It was early in the morning, so it was relatively empty at the moment. Max at school, Jerry in the back, and Theresa and Justin taking orders.

Harper watched as Alex’s eyes followed her brother, a soft smile on her face. Justin caught her eye, winking at her before going back to work.

Alex let out a laugh. A blush on her face as she turned to Harper.

“Tell me about it,” Harper said. She couldn’t help but be affected by Alex’s bright energy. Harper had never seen her so radiant, and it was satisfying to know why Alex was so happy and for herself to be content with the reason too.

Alex gave a shy smile back, her cheeks still rosy. “Are you sure, you won’t get uncomfortable?” Alex asked. Harper nodded in response, watching as Alex immediately relaxed.

“I don’t know when it started. I think it’s just always been there my whole life.”

“So I’ve heard,” Harper said, recalling her conversations with both Max and Justin.

“Here, I want to show you something,” Alex said, moving their sandwiches to the side of the table. She summoned a thick portfolio into her hands, clutching it in both hands. “I know I’ve never been the best at expressing my emotions so this is what I got...It’s a life long project that absolutely no one else can see.”

Then she placed it down on the table with the utmost care. Harper had never seen Alex hold something with such regard before. Then she slowly opened the folder revealing it’s contents and was perplexed by what she saw.

For what lay before her was a wrinkled piece of paper, a castle on the right side and two stick figures were drawn in the center: one a prince indicated by the crown on his head and the other a knight. Scribbled on the bottom was ”Justin and Alex happily ever after.”

“I made it when I was six years old. Little me imagined I’d fight dragons and ride a motorcycle before I was reunited with my Prince Charming, Justin.” Alex admitted, a little embarrassed. “I would have never kept it but you always talk about how you can find out something about yourself by the things you create.”

Alex looked fondly down at the drawing. “I guess I always knew what my priorities were. What my end goal would be. That Justin has always been my Prince Charming”

Harper smiled, now regarding the drawing with more appreciation.

“Umm… I made this and then recreated it recently.” Alex flipped through the pile, then showed two papers side by side. The first: a simple drawing of a boy with a wand. The second was more lifelike, set in a room with a boy sitting cross legged, a look of wonder in his eyes as he looked at the magic at his fingertips. “I remember being really sad the day Justin came into his powers because he had something I didn’t. But he spent all day by my side, showing me his magic and cheering me up. We stayed up all night watching and playing with the magic, letting it dance around us. Justin and magic have always gone hand and hand, and I’m greedy enough to have both.”

Harper nodded. She loved the drawing, how it seemed to convey a certain innocence and youthfulness, and how magnificent the magic looked. She could respect magic just a little more now.

“I made this when I was fourteen.” Alex was about to set it down, then quickly held it against her chest. “Harper if you show this to anyone, remember that I’m a wizard and a pretty reckless one at that. I’ll make sure it looks like an accident.”

“Promise.” Harper gave a tight smile at Alex’s threat. Satisfied, Alex set the paper down to reveal a painting of a starry sky. Two people on a magic carpet, carefree smiles on their face. Harper grabbed the painting, flailing it around. “Oh my gosh, you painted you and Justin as Aladdin and Jasmine. I knew it, the magic carpet and the initials, right?! You should’ve totally sang *A Whole New World*”

“Haha, very funny Harper. Now, keep your voice down, someone could hear you.” Alex panicked, snatching it out of her hand and looking around the room. “Yes, okay I did. And now we’re moving on...”

Alex tucked her hair behind her ear. Clearly flustered as she searched through the papers. Harper saw countless sketches, drawings, and paintings of Justin. All so distinct and different, painting him in so many colours and lights and emotions: happy, sad, laughing and natural. One where he was hunched over a table, studying hard. Another where he stood, arms crossed staring off into the distance. Alex had seen him in so many lights and yet it was like she could appreciate all of them. Like she treasured every aspect of him.

Harper then regarded her best friend. The girl who never revealed all her cards, was showing her a part of herself no one ever saw. Harper felt like she was invading into Alex's innermost thoughts when she stared down at them. It felt like with one glance she knew how Alex truly felt for him. She figured that's why Alex kept them so close to her, in a safe portfolio and never wanted to reveal them.

"Thank you for sharing this with me." Harper softly smiled. Alex nodded back, before she went back to searching.

"Whoops, not that one," Alex yelped, making one vanish from the pile. Harper felt her cheeks heat up. Who knew Alex knew anatomy so well, despite her hate for science? So Harper had finally got to see Justin in nude glory, just not the way her teen mind had imagined…

"Here it is!" Alex rejoiced, and then she quickly turned serious. "I've never told you about what happened in the Carribean because I myself couldn't even admit what happened. It took years for me to confront it and realize what had actually happened. But I guess this can tell you enough."

And then she placed a canvas in front of Harper. Painted on it was two people sitting cross legged in front of a fire in the middle of a rainforest. The canvas was filled with numerous colors, all of them blending, contrasting and brightening the image together. Harper could feel the warmth of the fire, the heat of the rainforest and she felt her emotions begin to reflect the two within the painting. Both softly smiling at each other, with clear looks on their face.

Alex had perfectly conveyed what they were both saying. Without knowing the full story, Harper understood Justin and Alex had gone on a difficult journey together. Something that had brought them closer together and made them cherish each other. It would always be them facing the world together. That they would go to the ends of the earth for each other.

"Wow…" Harper breathed, and then simply stated from the bottom of her heart: "Alex, this is beautiful."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" Alex breathed. "I made it one day when we had this really ugly fight. I pulled

up a canvas, put my music on blast to drown everything out, just let myself go and didn't stop until I was satisfied with it. When I first saw it, it was too much for me too. I nearly broke down because It was like I couldn't run anymore I had to stare at it head on. This thing I've felt for my entire life was real and there was a chance he felt it to. "

"One day, I guess, I was just tired of fighting it. I knew I didn't want to live the rest of my life not knowing. Not knowing how it felt to love and be loved so fully. And well, I was a bit impulsive, but I managed to get him. After all, he'd follow me into my most reckless adventures."

Alex glanced off to the side, Harper already knew she was watching Justin work. Alex did that a lot, whenever she got the chance, she'd look for him. Always searching for him in the room and watching him closely. Harper couldn't believe she never noticed before how much Alex loved watching him all the time.

"Justin's had my heart forever. He always has and always will. I was just too scared to admit it. And when I finally did everything made so much sense. It's the reason why I acted the way I did. Why I always wanted to pick fights with him, or make a mess so he could clean it up. Why I always stuck my foot in it whenever it had to do with him. No one can keep up with me the way he does. No one can keep me in line the way he does. I- I love him, Harper. And there's no one for me but him."

"Love who you love and be with them," Harper smiled.

"Mmhmm…" Alex murmured. "Yeah-," She choked out and then the tears began pouring. Harper immediately got up, hugging Alex close as she continued to cry.

"Sorry. This is just really nice. I guess everything just hit all at once," Alex chuckled. "Could you stop hugging me, so I could stop crying?"

Harper let go, but soon enough Alex began crying again.

"You girls okay?" Theresa asked, arriving at the table.

"Yeah, we're fine mom," Alex said, taking a deep breath to calm herself down.

"Oh, mija. You're crying," Theresa said, stepping forward to wipe her daughter's tears away before

Alex swatted at her hand.

“What? Ew! Get this stuff off my face,” Alex joked, still with visible tear streaks on her cheeks.

Not saying a word, Harper decided to give Alex another hug, and let her just have a moment.

“Okay, okay. Get off me. I’m done,” Alex said. She immediately let go, not at all offended, moving back to her side of the table. After so many years of friendship she understood this was how Alex dealt with her emotions.

Harper knew Alex never enjoyed being vulnerable. Alex needed to be in control of her situation, she couldn’t show any weakness or someone would use it as the upper hand. Alex always needed the upper hand.

But she also knew that if Alex trusted you enough she’d open up just for a few seconds and let herself be vulnerable because she knew you would hold her together. And how fitting that Justin was the one who always comforted her, because Alex trusted Justin to fully break down her walls and let him just hold her.

She looked over to see Theresa had disappeared just as quickly as she came, after knowing that her daughter was fine.

“Thanks. Umm…” Alex drifted off trying to find where her mom was in the room, seeing she was at the other side, she asked, ”What made you change your mind?”

“Honestly, Max,” Harper noted, scrunching her face.

“What?! You’ve got to be shitting me!” Alex screeched, eyes widening to a comical size.

“Alex!” Three Russo’s shouted in unison at her loud cursing.

“Okay well it started with Max, and then Justin visited-.“

“And he got all sappy and romantic?” Alex asked, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

“Yeah…”

“Gross.” Alex scrunched her face in disgust, while Harper raised her brows at that. Alex sure was something.

“Yeah, and that grossness is all yours,” Harper taunted.

“Oh, so now you’re teasing me?” Alex played along, eyebrows raised, “Well that’s just great.”

“Okay, but seriously they helped a lot. And there was one more thing. A story I have…”

And boy did Harper have a literal story. She reached down and used both hands to lug stacks of paper onto the table.

“Holy shit!” Alex shouted loudly, jolting in surprise and attracting the attention of the whole Subshop.

“Alex!” Was shouted from three parts of the Subshop once again.

Ignoring her family, Alex asked, “You wrote all of this?” She stared wide eyed at the massive piles of papers.

“Alex, can you please stop swearing.” Justin was fast walking towards them like a man on a mission. “Two customers complained and then left because of inappropriate language use. And you know how dad gets about losing customers,” Justin sighed. Alex paid no mind to his clear agitation.

“Are you gonna make me?” She provoked instead, smirking at him with dark eyes. And it was easy to read exactly what she was trying to say. And Harper watched as Justin seemed to relax all at once, his mood reflecting Alex’s.

“Maybe I will,” He mimicked, swiftly sliding into the booth.

Oh gosh, were they gonna do this right here, right now… because their parents were at the other side of the sub shop. And Harper may have come to terms with them, but that didn’t mean she wanted to watch two people lock lips. He was leaning in, when he caught a glimpse of the papers from the corner of his eyes.

“Wait, what is that?” His attention was quickly grabbed by the unavoidable mass of papers. Harper relaxed at that, while Alex pouted crossing her arms together.

“My story,” Harper smiled. Both proud to share her creation and amused at Alex’s grumpiness.

“And how did this happen?” Justin asked, totally ignoring Alex’s sour mood. Then Alex visibly relaxed, and Harper would bet he was totally holding her hand under the table.

“So when I was young I had a therapist that told me to write my emotions down on paper. And well, long story short, I kind of started writing the many adventures you guys have been on in hopes of understanding you two. Analyzing your emotions, your actions, reasons why we got here. And I’m not saying it’s perfect, but it sure helped me come to terms,” she shared.

“Oh my gosh,” Alex trilled, shaking Justin’s shoulder, a gleam in her eyes. “It’s happening…”

“Wait. What’s happening?” Harper inquired.

“Alex, you don’t think-,“ Justin questioned. And they were doing that annoying thing where they silently communicated. Really, how had she been this blind about them before now?

“Justin, I think it is,” Alex beamed.

“Would one of you just tell me what’s going on!?”

“Harper, have you named the book?” Justin asked.

“Umm…it’s just a whole bunch of stories. But I guess it’s Charmed-.“

“And Dangerous!” They hollered in unison, smiling at each other like they’d discovered something amazing.

What was so amazing about this? There was nothing really special, not like she was gonna publish them under a ‘nom de plum’ and share to the world the misadventures of wizards: Julia and Alan. And-.

Wait a minute.

She’d read these books when she was in high school. She remembers telling Alex about them and then Alex, Justin and Max tried to track down the writer. Then her and Alex had that horrible fight that kept her bewildered through the length of it. And when they finally mad up, out of blue Alex gave her permission to write her adventures and-.

“Oh my gosh, I’m HJ Darling!” She proclaimed. Justin and Alex nodded eagerly. “And I have to go back in time to publish these books…” She realized then, her mood severely lowering.

Harper should have known getting involved with these Russos meant adventure for all. She should have realized magic would always be prominent in her life, and turn her world upside down…and send her back in time. Gosh, the things she did for these Russos. But, they were her soft spot after all.

“Harper, I miss you so much! I even miss your weird snickerdoodles with red hots. The family is doing really good, but we all miss you so much. Mom and Dad are currently somewhere in Puerto Rico right now for their 35th anniversary. Max just introduced three new and very successful sandwiches: one for the mortal world and the other two for the Wizard World. Little Maxine just began walking. She’s so adorable, I just want to hold her and never let go. Justin’s kind of stressed because of the influx of mortals trying to get into the wizard world like it’s a fucking tourist site, they’ve been calling Wiztech, Hogwarts I think, something lame like that. But he’s also focusing on the charity ball. You know the one to raise money, so low income wizard families can also go to Wiztech? Gosh, I love him so much… Ummm... and I opened that art gallery, you know the underground tunnel concept and I think people are loving it.”

“Sorry to say I am making those snickerdoodles with red hots right now. But wow, that’s amazing Alex! You guys have been doing a lot. And I’m so proud of you all. Send everyone my love,” Harper responded. She was talking to Alex through the wizard phone Justin had made specifically for her, so she could communicate with Alex even with the time vortex.

Harper had been making regular one month trips to the past all with the help of Alex. Each time to publish a new book and promote it, while keeping her identity a secret. At first, there was a possibility that she’d have to stay in the past for several years, but then that would mean she’d be isolated in the past with no Alex, no Justin, no Max, or Theresa or Jerry or her husband: Zeke. Also, none of her successes from the future and that freaked her out. So Justin proposed the one month per year plan, and even introduced a computer she could use to respond to fans from the past year round.

“And don’t miss me too much, we’ve done this like seven times now. I’ll be back soon, and you can always drop by, you know?”

“And give Justin a conniption, no thank you- well actually-. No, Harper he’s been so stressed I don’t even want to try playing a lousy prank on him. But I think I know something else that will relax him-.“

“Alex, gross,” Harper interrupted. “Speaking of gross, how’s my husband?”

“Haha, Zeke misses you a whole lot, but the children are keeping him sane. We’ve had to keep him extremely busy and he’s been doing well taking care of your fashion company. Well, as well as Zeke can do with fashion. And I check in every now and then. Don’t worry Miss CEO Harper Finkle Beakerman, your reputation won’t be ruined for taking a hiatus. People actually eat that shit up,” Alex shared.

“Okay, that’s good, because you will feel my wrath if you slander my company,” Harper threatened, then sweetly said, “And tell Zeke I miss him and my babies.”

“Yeah, of course. Oh, and also remember past Alex, Justin and Max are coming this Monday. You know, the day after Max’s birthday? I only remembered all of this because Justin told me. And also, I have a list he prepared just to remind you about the plan,” Alex continued.

Harper nodded, preparing to walk around the abandoned warehouse to check that everything was in its place. She glanced into the big open warehouse with desks lined up, and papers scattered all over the tables.

To keep herself sane, each month she visited, she decided to return to that old passion she had of opening up that scrapbooking class for “at risk youths,” and it seemed to be working well.

“So, leave a pile of canes for Justin because he stupidly sprains his ankle as soon as we arrive,” Alex instructed, and Harper could almost hear Alex’s eyes roll as she said it. She glanced over at the box of canes and nodded to herself.

“Wear a goldfish headband, like with a literal goldfish inside a bowl, so they can connect you to past Harper. And in general, give them a lot of hints to indicate you’re Harper. Like, oh, I loved seeing those plates of Justin’s face on the wall, make sure you have those.”

“Hey, I really liked that goldfish headband. And having a headband that you can love, feed and wear is so innovative,” Harper pouted.

“Yeah. Okay,” was Alex’s stilted response.

“And yes, I have those Justin plates you insisted we make…” Harper confirmed, rolling her eyes and smiling at the memory of a very energetic Alex insisting they paint plates for one of their hangouts. At first she’d been just as enthused, until she realized they were painting Justin’s face and it had taken a whole day to make five identical plates because Alex insisted they had to be perfect. And that included Justin’s eye color too. Harper thinks it’s because Alex hadn’t seen Justin for a while, both being buried in their separate careers, so Alex really enjoyed spending a whole day staring at and painting his face. Alex never liked to admit it, but the girl was seriously whipped for him. “And why did we make those?”

“Because we need them to know it’s you but not future you,” Alex began. “I know us, Harper. Past us wouldn’t settle for no answers about the future. So tell them the truth, but keep it vague, like absolute bare minimum. We don’t want them ever finding out what happens. Especially not past Justin and Alex. Their feelings are only just developing and they still haven’t gone to the Caribbean, so they’ll freak out. Which also means you can’t tell Alex how you started the stories. Also, umm…Okay, so I, Alex, me, we end up getting mad at you for a bit for writing the stories without our permission, but don’t worry, just ask Justin for help. His geekiness will not resist the opportunity to ”save the future” and he’ll fix it….”

She’d published her books in the past because they’d be more successful here. It was also to fulfill the loop in the timeline that future Harper created. A concept that Justin spent several days trying to explain, but it just confused her even further. There was one reason bigger than having a successful series or keeping a time vortex sustained. It was Justin. He’d confessed it was the book that made him realize his feelings for Alex. The starting point of his part of the Justin and Alex story.

And what a whirlwind to realize, because while she wrote those books to help herself understand them, she was also the catalyst for Justin realizing his own feelings. That was a mind trip for sure.

Over the years she'd watched the fanbase steadily grow into a massive one. One that was very invested in her stories, and especially in the strong bond between Alan and Julia. Pure and wonderful to some. Questionable to others. And she's even seen little communities of people who ship them romantically. She enjoyed reading people's analysis of her writing and word choice, and how a lot of people managed to catch the subtext.

Sadly, Alan and Julia would never be together (this wasn't *Flowers in The Attic*). Despite the many reasons they should be, they could never be together because the general public would have a fit over it, especially when its target demographic was hildren and teenagers. And what a shame, for such undeniable chemistry and the perfect build that seemed to desperately scream in your face.

Harper was sad to know she could never give two characters she'd grown to love their proper ending like Justin and Alex had managed to get.

But Alan and Julia will never be Justin and Alex.

They will never be able to encompass wholly who Justin and Alex are to her, what they mean to her. All of their perfections and flaws, their emotions, and feelings and their need to be together. The way they don't need to justify being in love with each other.

Through Alan and Julia, Harper found out this: For all Alex's rebellion, mischief and heart there was Justin with his rule following, responsibility and mind.

She saw they were perfect for each other. And it was a way better love story than what she attempted to write on that yacht all those years ago. A way better story than what she'd made in these books.

Her best friend was her best self. Alex was now more mature, responsible and sure of herself. And Justin was more relaxed, confident and carefree. They balanced each other out and filled in the other's gaps.

Harper didn't put up with Alex's bullshit only to leave her because the girl happened to find the perfect guy. (And trust Harper to know Justin was the perfect guy). He just so happened to be her

brother.

I will always love you my friend
Fall in love with the art of living.
Fall in love with letting things be.
Fall in love with listening.
Be still in the sun,
where the winds ever-gently blow,
knowing it is here,
in moments like this,
you are living,
and you will grow.
Family isn't always blood.
It's the people in your life who want you in theirs. The ones who accept you for who you are. The ones who would do anything to see you smile, and who love you no matter what.

(Sources: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9)

Word Count of Story: 13,444.

A couple Thank You's are needed:

I would like to say thank you first and foremost to my Beta Reader and new friend, **TheWolfHourX** (Check out her fics on FF.net, they're so fucking gOOD and real sAUCY). So to her: Thank you for giving your time and effort. Thank you for constantly correcting my punctuation, dialogue and general dumb mistakes. Asking me questions that helped me expand the story, checking way too many times over to make sure it was the best it could be, and for giving me an amazing first experience with a beta reader. And just being a fucking rockstar. Beta readers are probably the unsung hero's of the fiction world.

I'd also like to thank the inspiration that struck me perfectly on my day off and made me fire through this fic after it sat in docs for months... I'd like to thank Clairo's *Immunity* for being my music inspiration, as well as '*When She Loved Me'* covered by Lyn Lapid and Studio Ghibli's '*Promise of the World*' and '*Ashitaka and San.*'

Also I made a playlist because I fucking love those things. But this one isn't as perfectly crafted as the one I made for Gilbert/Anne's '*You Are the Flowers That Bloom In My Heart*' (shamelessly plugs). Hmmm...so I'll just promote down here.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Please feel free to follow me on:
tumblr: @dysfunctionaljalexnet for more Jalex content.
My Jalex tumblr blog is now @stoneofdreams.
Youtube: @stoneofdreams

I also love messaging, so don't be afraid to privately message me there. Mayhaps it will inspire me to write more.

JALEX DISCORD: Yes, we have a little discord server for Jalex where we talk and just share our love for the ship. So if you're interested in that, please message me.

Story Talk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Welcome to the story talk!

I got the idea from one of my fav writers in a different fandom. Directly quoted from them: “a story talk is sort of an author’s post-word thing/director’s cut sort of thing where I make some commentary about the fic!”

The reason why I want to do a story talk is because I would like to write down my thoughts and and freeze them in time, in a way it’s an account of what I have to say now. I was checking back on my other work, “You Are the Flowers That Bloom In My Heart”. While rereading the comments, I found out that the story idea had come randomly to me while scanning papers at a dental clinic (*how weird!*). I had no recollection of that memory but when I read it, it came back to me, even memories of writing the story and how I forced my mom to watch this video on Hanahaki disease so when I explained the story to her she’d better understand. (I didn’t tell my mom anything about this story lmao).

You know when you see yourself in a photo from a year ago, or reread a project or essay, or find an old diary, watch a video of yourself and you can look at it in admiration. You're older now and are separated from the you then, so you look at it in awe because, *wow*, that person was you and there’s this sense of pride and you can now appreciate your younger selves mind. That’s how I felt and I’d like to have that feeling again.

So, selfishly, yes this is mostly for me because I fucking love — and I mean love — explaining myself (when I have no shame).

But also, it’s for those readers who are interested in some insight. I decided to write my own story talk because I enjoyed reading this writer’s story talks. It showed me her process and how her mind worked. And it may have taken me 15-50 minutes, even a day to read a persons work (depending on that WC). But the writer has taken an exponentially larger amount of time to write it, (maybe they didn’t). But all those words you read, the story idea, the world and the characterization all came from their mind. And that’s AMAZING!

My 3 reasons for a Story Talk:

- Freeze and solidify my thoughts in this moment, we are constantly changing so it’s nice to make this permanent in a way.
- Let my older self look back at me in appreciation.

- Give readers a little insight.

Now for the actual story talk lmao. (This is honestly just a mess of my thoughts moving from one to the next to the next, let's hope it makes sense). Obvious spoilers for the story!

How did the idea come to you?

It came to me randomly one night, right before bed. A long while ago, I want to say May. I just had this image of Harper walking in on Justin and Alex making out in their apartment, and then I opened notes wrote down the scene and went to sleep. When I woke up the next day and read it, I was pleasantly surprised with how well it was written! So that whole scene with Justin and Alex bumping heads and Harper screaming, it's been written since May.

I've always considered 'Future Harper' fanfic material. And I knew I always wanted to put my own spin on those "Charmed and Dangerous" books. Paired with also wanting to write a Harper-finding-out fic.

And so I, myself, wanted to try my hands at the premise of this episode. I love the intrigue of Time Travel, the idea that the person from the future is aware of what will happen to their friends in the past. And so I asked myself how the *Charmed and Dangerous* books were made. Obviously Jalex would be the central reason because, *yes*, those two totally fuel me. I wanted to follow her journey to accepting Justin and Alex. Also, I've always loved Harper and Alex's friendship so I wanted to explore that. And so more scenes were brainstormed until finally after months of it sitting in WIPs I powered through it on a chill Monday.

It was also inspired by Save Vs. Magic's *'OTP'* which is, in my personal opinion, one of the best FAN-FUCKING-TASTIC META FICS EVER. (And yes the book character names are totally taken from that). But the fics sadly unfinished. (Totally worth reading as he's a phenomenal writer, the characterization is on fucking point and it comes with a whole universe).

Why Harper's POV?

I love Harper a lot. Who she is as a person and who she is to the Russos, especially to Alex.

My headcanon is Harper would accept Justin & Alex, whether she knew all along or it was slow acceptance. I definitely knew I wanted to try my hand at that acceptance storyline.

The outside perspective is also very intriguing to me. I've enjoyed reading lots of outsider perspective fics, with Max's POV or Theresa's, sometimes even Juliet's. it allows me to focus on a different aspect of Justin and Alex's relationship, the subtle parts, the *why, the reason why they worked*. Because yes, they are brother and sister, so why did these two fall for each other.

In a way it also saved me from addressing first hand the conflicting emotions they experienced when falling for each other. I was in Harper's point of view so I didn't have to worry about conveying that self hatred, or the utter angst of loving someone you shouldn't. In a way I was right where I was supposed to be in looking at this relationship: the outsider perspective. Weirdly enough, Harper's journey is kind of a reflection of my own in shipping Jalex. The isolation and worry of shipping inc*st and how I turned shameless.

A lot of writers have been able to tackle the conflict of emotions Justin & Alex experience, and have done so wonderfully. I commend them all! I feel it is a very difficult situation (read: inc*st) to tackle and there's a lot of room for messing up and making it not believable or realistic. So I'm happy where I am, but I hope I can feel comfortable and confident enough to write in Justin or Alex's POV with future works.

And on that note. Justin and Alex are literally my babies, I love them so much. I am quite critical of how people write them. That's the reason I decided to focus on writing this story as opposed to my many WIPs. There is a definite fear that I'll mess up and not write them right. I didn't at all want to disrespect them or make them come off OOC. I was scared in fact to get them wrong and make it feel like OCs who just face claimed them. I feel I can relate to Harper, so it's much easier to write her. But, both Justin and Alex are nowhere near my personality so it is a struggle to write them. Especially the way they talk and act, *side eyes Alex.*

The outside perspective also allows me to have Established Jalex without too much hard work. The fandom is severely lacking in Established! Jalex and while I love the utter angst and conflict it takes to get them to where they are, I also think we deserve to see the payoff. If we all ship them shouldn't we want to make stories where they're already a couple with outside challenges to face together (like Harper finding out). And I do have story ideas with Established Jalex!

So it's inspired by 2x16 Future Harper?

Yup, and there's tons of references to the episode if you'll notice. Like Boy Salad.

The Time Travel Scene?

That last scene wasn't going to be written at all. in fact I imagined ending it on Alex and Harper's last conversation and then Harper making her final thoughts on Justin and Alex. And then I wrote Harper's reaction to being 'HJ Darling" and kind of let myself type away. Thought how cool would It be if there was a Jalex-ified purpose for Harper traveling back in time and thus we got the last scene. The last scene also has a purpose in filling in the plot holes my story had with the 2x16 Future Harper episode, and fully connecting the stories. And so it came full circle and I am quite glad I decided to do so because people seemed to really like it. I also really like the Future Lives I gave these characters.

Also something to think about, at the end Harper is in her mid 30s and so is Zeke. Jerry and Theresa are celebrating 35 years of marriage, so it'd be safe to say they're 50+ and Max would be

in his 30s as well. While Alex and Justin are living it up, being immortal, looking like they're in their 20s. And yet Alex and Harper are still best friends because Alex ain't no ageist she loves everyone no matter how old and wrinkly they get! (30s is not old at all, but to an immortal like Alex it is).

Any Themes?

Yup. If you'll notice there is a **theme of passions, and using them as outlets and to express themselves.** Harper has her fashion and her writing. Max has the sandwiches. Justin is books and learning. And then Alex with her art. I feel it is really relatable to depend on passions to help deal with emotions.

That's why there's that scene with Harper creating the dress before she went back to society. She was making armour, so she could stay strong with this inner turmoil.

With Justin and Alex: Justin looked to gain knowledge, he consumed all of the literature and had, no doubt, done a lot of reflecting and that's how he was able to deal with it. And then in his talk to Harper, he was able to kind of "go off" about his feelings because he's more in touch with his emotions and he expresses himself through his words.

Whereas, Alex outlet was her art which made her feelings tangible to her. For Alex's part I wasn't planning on making her talk about her emotions because that's not really her. However, my beta, TheWolfHourX really loved Justin's part and wanted Alex to have that 'moment' as well. And rightly so, Alex did deserve her time to express her emotions because if Max could talk about it, if Justin could, why couldn't she? But of course, Alex wasn't gonna just "go off," she needed something to buffer her and that was her art. Her art allowed her to express herself. That's why she clutches onto that portfolio so tightly and handles it so delicately because it is an expression of her love for Justin. I love the poetry of that, of her finding her feelings for Justin through her art. Especially the image of a heartbroken Alex, kneeling in front of a canvas of that 'campfire moment' forced to stare at it, no longer able to ignore it, like WOW.

Another theme is the **Found Family.** I do touch on Harper's relationship on her own family and how her parents are in Romania. I show her closeness to each Russo member, through her knowledge of what's going on in their lives.

One sentence that I feel highlights the natural way she has been seen as an honorary Russo is in subtle word choice in what Max says: *"Remember that summer Alex* **and Mom** *were fighting like crazy? And then Alex went to the Caribbean with us instead of staying with you?"*

My beta had corrected it to say “Alex and my mom” because that is correct grammar but I knew that didn’t sit right with me. I hadn’t even realized until she highlighted it because it had come so naturally to me. I switched it back then explained why. “I think I purposely made it 'Mom' because they all (Russo Siblings) subconsciously think Theresa is also Harper's mom in a sense. So they're never like "my mom" SHES MINE, its kind of like our Mom... you know? I have friends who are super close to each other who call each other’s mom, ‘Mom.' So it comes from that.” Then there’s the way she texts Theresa, or talks to Max. Throughout the story Harper gains two brothers and mends her relationship with her sister.

Harper’s acceptance of Justin&Alex is also definitely due to how invested she is in the Russos because it is true they are so connected. But not in an unhealthy, trapped way but in the way that she cares for them all so deeply so why would she leave now just because this thing is taboo, Justin and Alex (and Max) are clearly happier because it’s out in the open.

Any last wishes for the story?

I hope my writing made an impact on you. As an amateur writer it is quite a huge thing to wish, but I hope this story lingers in the back of your mind. I hope you like it so much that you remember it when you rewatch Future Harper. I hope it becomes a personal headcanon of yours. I hope you'll always remember it. Like so many stories that have stayed lingering in the back of my mind, I hope this is one of those for you.

(I also hope everything I wrote down made sense)

I have a lot of story ideas and WIPs, so hopefully inspiration strikes and I see you soon!

Chapter End Notes

Wow if you read this story talk. Thank you so much for taking the time to understand the process, it really means a lot.

Please feel free to follow me on:
tumblr: @dysfunctionaljalexnet for more Jalex content.
My Jalex tumblr blog is now @stoneofdreams.
Youtube: @stoneofdreams

I also love messaging, so don't be afraid to privately message me there. Mayhaps it will inspire me to write more.

JALEX DISCORD: Yes, we have a little discord server for Jalex where we talk and just share our love for the ship. So if you're interested in that, please message me.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!